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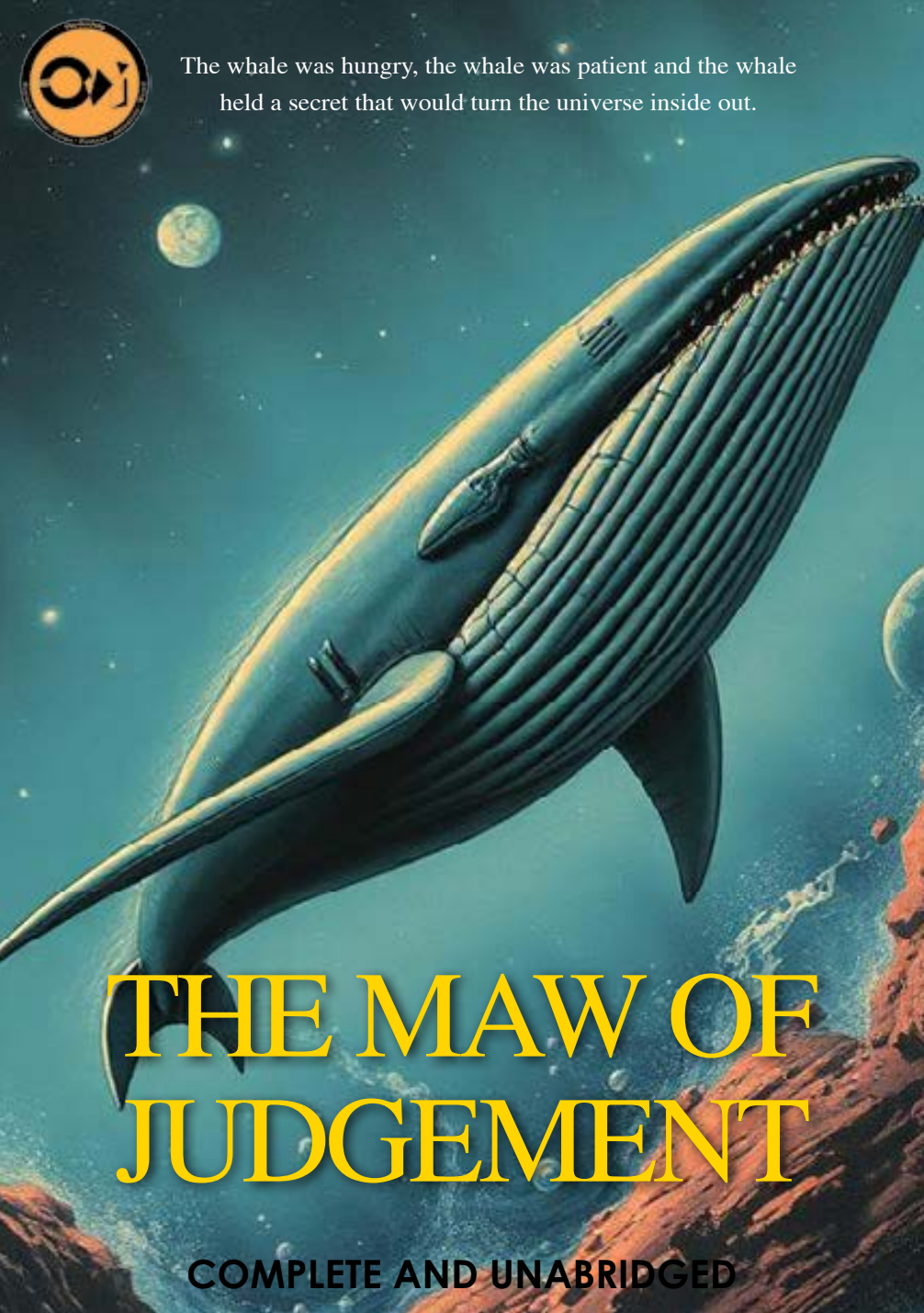

THE MAW OF JUDGEMENT

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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Ovi Pulp

The maw of judgement

Complete and unabridged

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The starlanes had birthed empires and strangled them. For three centuries, the Terran Federation and the Xylosian Collective had carved their war across fifty light-years of contested space. Neither side remembered who fired first; neither cared. But now, a new weapon had risen from the deep dark, a living dreadnought, a space-whale of impossible size called the Kazamat. It drifted in the nebula of Thule, digesting the war's worst liars in its seven-chambered gut.

Into that organic abyss, two delegations had just descended. Each believed they would leave alive. They were wrong. The whale was hungry, the whale was patient and the whale held a secret that would turn the universe inside out.

Commander Eva Meridian stood at the airlock of the Terran shuttle, adjusting the high collar of her dress uniform. Around her, the interior walls of the Kazamat pulsed with a sickening, bioluminescent violet light. The air tasted of ozone, wet copper and ancient dust.

"We shouldn't be here, Commander," whispered Lieutenant Vance, his hands trembling over his sidearm. "Look at the bulkhead. It's... breathing."

"Calm yourself, Lieutenant," Eva replied, her voice a cool, soothing balm. Her eyes, sharp and calculating, locked onto the approaching Xylosian delegation. "In a room full of monsters, the one who panics is always eaten first."

The Xylosian leader, Arbiter Vael, glided forward. His crystalline skin refracted the violet glow, casting jagged shadows across the ribbed, fleshy floor.

"Terran," Vael clicked, his vocal synthesiser translating the harsh syllables into British English. "You bring weapons to a parley. Your deceit precedes you."

"And you bring a cloaked battlegroup sitting just outside the nebula's lip, Arbiter," Eva countered smoothly, offering a flawless, diplomatic smile. "Shall we stop

pretending either of us came here to sign a peace treaty?"

As the two factions converged, the fleshy floor beneath them shuddered. A low, sub-audible groan vibrated through their boots, rattling their teeth. The ribbed walls began to secrete a thick, amber fluid, sealing the exit behind them.

"The first chamber digests the pride," a voice echoed, not in their ears, but directly inside their minds. It was old, heavy, and drenched in malice. "The second digests the plots. Welcome, little liars."

Vael's crystalline posture shattered. "What is this? Meridian, is this your trap?"

"If it were my trap, Arbiter, I wouldn't be standing in the middle of it," Eva said. She stepped toward the centre of the chamber, where a massive, iris-like valve was slowly dilating, revealing a pit of pure, roiling energy.

This was the Kazamat's secret: it didn't just consume flesh; it fed on the cosmic friction of deception. The war had sustained it for centuries, but it had grown tired of the crumbs. It wanted the architects.

"You plan to sacrifice your own fleet!" Vance realised, horror dawning on his face as he aimed his pistol at Eva. "You sold us out to this... thing!"

"I saved us from ourselves," Eva said, her voice dropping to a fierce whisper. She looked directly at the ceiling, addressing the leviathan. "Kazamat! The Terran fleet plans to glass this entire sector. The Xylosians have a virus primed for your core. They are both poison to you."

"Liar!" Vael roared, drawing his plasma blade.

Eva didn't flinch. She knew the truth was the ultimate weapon because nobody ever expected it from her.

"It's true," she whispered to the beast, projecting her thoughts into the dark. "Open your maw wide. Swallow both fleets outside, and you will finally be free of our rot."

The whale shivered in agreement. Outside, the nebula convulsed as the living dreadnought began to feed, crushing a hundred starships in its external jaws.

This is the story of Commander Eva Meridian, the greatest liar who ever told the truth. This is the story

of how she betrayed every living soul in two fleets, and then, standing amidst the bones of empires, talked her way into legend.

The descent into darkness

Commander Eva Meridian of the Terran Federation had been in tighter spots. At least, that was the lie she told herself as the drop-pod screamed through the *Kazamat's* atmospheric membrane, a slick, pulsing wall of bioluminescent cartilage that peeled open like a wounded eyelid to swallow them whole.

Inside the cramped cabin, the air tasted of ozone and copper. Beside her, four Terran marines clutched their crash webbing, knuckles stark white, faces pale and slick with sweat beneath their helmet visors. Opposite them, secured in the pod's transparent containment cage, the Xylosian delegation chittered their spidery limbs in a frantic, syncopated rhythm. Three diplomats, two towering warriors, all wore the deep purple sash of the Collective's Truth Tribunal, their multifaceted eyes reflecting the strobing warning lights of the console.

"They're scared, Commander," whispered Sergeant Kell, his voice sounding dry as Martian dust over the comms. He glanced toward the aliens, his hand instinctively resting on the grip of his sidearm. "Look at those mandibles twitching. They know what's coming."

"Good," Eva said, her tone clipped and steady despite the vibration rattling her teeth. "Fear keeps the blood moving. Just make sure it doesn't paralyse you when that hatch opens."

With a sickening, shuddering lurch, the pod slammed into something soft. Wet. Terrifyingly organic. The walls of the *Kazamat's* first stomach chamber rippled violently like a hyperactive heart muscle, absorbing the kinetic impact. Through the thick plastoid viewport, Eva didn't see rock or steel, but forests of translucent gastric cilia waving lazily in a thick, amber acid mist.

Then came the sound. It didn't travel through the air so much as vibrate through the soles of their boots, a sound like a billion whispers filling the space, low, rhythmic, and deeply mournful. It was the whale's digestion song. It was a harrowing melody that spoke of ancient sorrows, of eons spent in dark servitude, of ten thousand lies digested and ten thousand more waiting to be dissolved in the dark.

The pod's emergency hatch blew outward with a sharp, hydraulic hiss. Acrid steam rolled into the cabin, smelling heavily of sulfur and decay, like the breath of a dying god. Eva unbuckled her harness and stepped out onto a floor that pulsed rhythmically under her boots. It felt warm, almost feverish, as if the living leviathan itself was sick with what it had been forced to become.

The Xylosian leader, a towering matriarch named Ssyllix, stepped from the cage. She extended a long, clawed limb toward the distant, vaulted ceiling, where a massive neural cluster glowed with a sickening, pale violet light. It looked like a brain the size of a mansion, suspended by thick cords of sinew.

"The Arbitrator," Ssyllix said, her mandibles clicking and rubbing together in a sound that might have been reverence, or perhaps pure, unadulterated fear. "It will judge who speaks false. The Builders created it to end wars by consuming deception. It has never been wrong, Commander."

Eva knew the legend well. The *Kazamat* had been engineered by an extinct race called the Builders, beings of such immense wisdom and technological mastery that they had eventually vanished into their own en-

lightenment, leaving behind only their weapons, their structures, and their profound regrets. For a standard Terran year, both the Federation and the Collective fleets had fed the whale their prisoners of war, hoping to sway its cosmic allegiance to their side. Now, the beast had grown weary of the proxy offerings. It had demanded the commanders themselves descend into its belly or face total annihilation from its biological dreadnought weapons.

"Then let's not lie to it," Eva said, adjusting the collar of her environmental suit. "I don't fancy being turned into bio-fuel. Let's move."

She began the long, treacherous walk through the spitting acid rain. The droplets stung her exposed wrist where her suit's outer layer had torn during the violent atmospheric entry. She ignored the burning sensation, focusing instead on the uneven, spongy terrain.

Behind her, Sergeant Kell checked his tactical scanner, his brow furrowed as he watched the digital readouts dance. "Commander, we have a problem. The ambient acid levels are rising. Slowly, but it's a steady incline. According to these telemetry readings, we have maybe two hours before this first chamber completely floods with digestive fluid."

"Two hours is a lifetime in infantry terms, Sergeant," Eva said, not breaking her stride. "Keep your eyes on the perimeter and keep moving."

"With respect, ma'am," Kell muttered, swivelling his rifle toward the shadows, "this isn't standard terrain. If that floor liquefies, we're dissolved before we can even draw a sidearm."

The Xylosians moved ahead of the Terran squad, their six jointed legs making an eerie, silent clicking on the organic floor. Ssyllix paused abruptly at a massive vertical valve, a tight sphincter of iridescent muscle that contracted and relaxed like a breathing lung.

"The whale chooses the order of our trials," Ssyllix said, turning three of her primary eyes to look back at Eva. "It has already tasted both your fleets' lies through the meat of our captured soldiers. Now it demands to taste ours directly. The Arbitrator lies deep within the seventh chamber. We must pass through six preceding stomachs to reach it, each designed to strip away a layer of our deception."

"Then let's not dawdle," Eva said, her voice dripping with artificial bravado. "I have a war to win, Matriarch, and my fleet is waiting for my signal."

Ssyllix let out a low, rattling hiss that sounded remarkably like an alien laugh. "You still think of victory, human? You think of flags and territory?"

"I think of survival," Eva countered, her jaw set. "And ensuring my species isn't wiped out by your Collective."

"We shall see what remains of your convictions when the Arbitrator peels back your mind," the matriarch replied, turning back to the pulsing muscular valve, which began to dilate, revealing a dark, dripping tunnel that sloped steeply downward into the dark.

Eva looked into the black descent. She didn't know then how profoundly wrong she was about everything. She didn't know that the bloody war she thought she was righteously fighting was merely a grand lie wrapped in a pristine flag, orchestrated by leaders who would never step foot inside a meat-grinder like this. She didn't know that the ancient whale was about to teach her the devastating, agonizing difference between winning a victory and discovering the truth.

But as the wet, suffocating heat of the second stomach washed over her, Eva drew her sidearm, took a deep breath of the tainted air, and stepped down into the dark. She was about to learn.

The first digestion

The path to the Arbitrator's chamber was lined with bones. Thousands of them. Human femurs, calcified Xylosian carapaces, and stranger skeletons from a dozen forgotten species, creatures whose names had died with them, whose deceits had been so monumental that even their own histories had been thoroughly digested. The caustic stomach acids hissed at their feet, bubbling like a witch's cauldron as the fluid rose to Eva's ankles.

Kell tapped his wrist console, his fingers trembling slightly against the damp chassis. He checked his suit's seal gauge, the digital readout casting a stark blue glow across his anxious face. "Sixty minutes till corrosive breach at current levels, Commander. If that lining fails, we turn into soup."

"Plenty of time," Eva said, though her heart hammered against her ribs like a caged animal. She adjusted the strap of her pulse rifle, more out of habit than any belief that lead and plasma could save them in the belly of this beast.

The first stomach chamber opened before them, a breathtaking cavern the size of a planetary stadium. Its fleshy, pulsing walls were lined with thousands of weeping digestive polyps that sang in eerie, overlapping harmonies of deception. Each polyp whispered a different, seductive lie.

"The war will end tomorrow."

"Your enemy is merciful."

"You are not afraid."

Eva tightly closed her eyes for a brief second, fighting the overwhelming urge to believe them. The sweet melodies wrapped around her mind like a warm blanket. That was the Great Whale's true power: not just to accurately detect lies, but to weaponize them, to make comforting falsehoods feel infinitely truer than the harsh reality.

Ssyllix paused at the exact centre of the chamber, where a wide pool of clear, highly concentrated acid

reflected the glowing neural clusters on the ceiling. The Xylosian's iridescent scales rippled with a nervous, emerald sheen.

"My ancestors told stories of the 'Kazamat' around the nesting fires," Ssyllix murmured, her multi-jointed fingers twitching over her sidearm. "They said the ancient Builders created it to judge the unjudgeable. But they also said the whale could be reasoned with. That it possessed a soul."

"Everything with a brain has a soul," Eva said, her boots splashing through the rising sludge. "The question is whether it has a choice."

A massive valve ahead of them groaned, opening with a wet, tearing sound. It was not a mechanical door, but a massive, living sphincter that peeled back like a dark flower blooming in reverse. Beyond it, the second stomach glowed with an eerie, rhythmic amber light.

The whale's song shifted. It grew deeper now. More urgent. Monstrous.

"Terrans. Xylosians. You come to plead for your pathetic wars. You have fed me liars for centuries. Now, I shall digest the truth."

The voice was not sound but a colossal vibration, resonating directly through Eva's very marrow and rattling her teeth. It spoke in a language far older than words—a telepathic language of pure, unadulterated meaning. She felt the whale's vast, ancient presence pressing weightily against the boundaries of her mind, not attacking, but testing, prodding, searching for the hidden lies she carried in her subconscious.

Eva stepped forward, her heavy combat boots squelching loudly on the spongy, organic floor. "We didn't come to plead, Arbitrator. We came to negotiate a mutually beneficial ceasefire."

"You came because I threatened to completely dissolve your fleets if you refused my summons," the voice boomed back, dripping with cosmic disdain.

"Same thing," Eva said dryly.

Behind her, Kell stifled a nervous laugh that quickly turned into a cough as the acrid fumes hit his throat.

The amber acid rose faster now, swirling around their shins. Ssyllix clicked her mandibles in sharp irritation, her compound eyes flashing. "Honourable Arbitrator, the Terrans deliberately broke the Treaty of Io! They seeded our agricultural asteroids with horrific bi-

oweapons. We have the preserved corpses as absolute proof. Three thousand innocent civilians, dissolved from the inside out by a pathogen that could only have originated from Terran military labs."

Eva snorted loudly, crossing her arms. "Your so-called 'corpses' were cloned, Ssyllix and you know it. Your own high-level forensics team confirmed the genetic anomalies, and then your high command buried the report. I have a encrypted copy right here in my suit's local memory, signed by your own Chief Examiner."

The whale's song shifted dramatically. A low, thunderous growl vibrated through the chamber's walls, causing several loose bones to slide into the acid pools with loud splashes.

"You both speak truths wrapped carefully in lies," the Arbitrator rumbled, the psychic weight of the words bringing Ssyllix to her knees. "The Xylosians did indeed clone the victims to frame the Terrans. But the Terrans used that very frame to justify a devastating, pre-emptive strike on the Xylosian nursery worlds. Three million young died in the firestorms. Not soldiers. Not warriors. Children."

An absolute, suffocating silence fell over the chamber. Even the rising acid seemed to pause its churning, as if the world itself was holding its collective breath.

Eva felt the floor drop inside her chest, a cold dread washing over her. "That's… that's not what the high command briefing said. The nursery worlds were heavily fortified military targets. We were told they were actively breeding aggressive soldier-castes."

"That is the convenient fiction your Admiral told you to ease his own conscience," the whale vibrated, the tone thick with an ancient, sorrowful pity. "Your Admiral is a liar. The nursery worlds held only unhatched eggs and helpless hatchlings. Your vanguard fleet burned them alive in their cradles. And you, Commander Meridian, signed the orbital targeting orders."

Kell grabbed her arm tightly, his grip bruising through her suit's insulation. "Eva, look at the telemetry! The acid's rising faster. We have less than three minutes to breach. We need to pull back now!"

But Eva wasn't looking at the encroaching acid. She wasn't looking at Kell, or the trembling Xylosian beside him. She was staring intently at the massive neural web that lined the chamber's biological ceiling, watch-

ing the way it pulsed frantically, sensing the profound, agonizing pain hidden deep within that grand vibration.

She realized then, with a terrifying clarity that cut through her soul like a scalpel, what this entity truly was. The whale wasn't acting out of divine justice or galactic superiority. It was suffering. Not as a weapon suffers, and not as a wild beast suffers.

"You're not an Arbitrator," Eva said softly, her voice barely a whisper against the psychic tide. "You're a slave."

The entire chamber shook violently.

The whale's whisper

The air inside the living cavern was thick with the stench of bile and ozone, a claustrophobic pressure that seemed to weigh directly on Eva's chest. The whale's whisper vibrated not through her ears, but straight into the marrow of her bones.

"I am what I was made to be," the entity rumbled, a low, tectonic frequency that rippled the bioluminescent fluid pooling around them.

"You're a prisoner," Eva pressed, stepping closer to the pulsing neural web. The translucent tendrils of the machine-organic hybrid flexed, spitting sparks of pale blue light. The acid was at her knees now, a Hadean soup hiss-burning through the outer protective layer of her environment suit. She could feel the sudden, terrifying bloom of heat against her skin, but she didn't care. She couldn't. "The Builders bred you to digest lies, but you never chose this. You never wanted to be a weapon. You wanted to swim the stars and sing to your children."

The whale's song shifted, mutating from a mechanical hum into a devastating, ragged keen. It was a sound Eva recognized instantly, stripped of all alien geometry, a sound like a mother weeping over a fresh grave.

"How do you know this?" the voice echoed in her mind, fracturing into a dozen overlapping, sorrowful tones. "How can a creature of flesh and brief days understand my grief?"

"Because I see it in your pulse," Eva said, her voice steady despite the searing pain in her legs. She gestured toward the rhythmically throbbing nodes above them. "I've interrogated prisoners before, across a dozen warzones. I know the difference between a guard and a captive, between malice and agony. You're not judging us. You're begging us to see you."

Behind her, the Xylosians scrabbled backward, their chitinous plates grinding together. Their claws clicked in frantic, rhythmic alarm against the calcified floor of the chamber. Ssyllix, the Xylosian attache, extended a trembling, multi-jointed limb toward Eva, his mandibles twitching violently.

"Commander, step away from the core!" Ssyllix hissed, the translator on his chest spitting out harsh, mechanical syllables. "The leviathan is trying to ma-

nipulate you. Its psychological profiles indicate it feeds on emotional vulnerability. It is projecting what you desire to hear to ensure its own survival!"

"No," Eva said, without looking back. She took another agonizing step forward, sinking deeper into the rising chemical sludge. "It feeds on lies, Ssyllix. And right now, I'm telling the truth."

A profound stillness fell over the cavern, broken only by the angry hiss of dissolving armour.

"She speaks truly," the whale whispered. The overwhelming pressure in Eva's mind softened, turning gentle, like a dying wave lapping against a shore. "I remember the stars before the war. I remember the absolute cold, the beautiful silence. I swam between them, free, riding the solar winds. I had a mate. I had calves that trailed in my wake. We sang songs that took a thousand years to finish, weaving melodies across entire galaxies."

The neural web flared with a pale, nostalgic amber light before plunging back into a sickly violet.

"Then the Builders came," the voice rasped, tinged with an ancient, unyielding horror. "They netted me with gravity wells. They hollowed my gut to make room

for their machineries of war. They wired my nerves directly to their logic engines. I have eaten ten thousand liars since that day. Each one burns inside me like a swallowed stone. Each lie I digest becomes a permanent part of my architecture. I cannot forget them. I cannot stop. I am a living library of every falsehood ever spoken in this wretched war."

Eva felt a strange warmth on her cheeks, contrasting sharply with the freezing air of the chamber. Tears. She hadn't cried since she was twelve years old, standing on the observation deck of a burning transport, watching her mother die in a Xylosian planetary raid. But those childhood tears had been born of terror, shed entirely for herself. These tears were different. These tears were for the whale.

"Free me," the whale whispered, a desperate, childlike plea vibrating through the massive organic pillars of the room. "Cut the primary neural nodes. Destroy the containment chambers. Let me rupture the stomach walls and swim one last time into the void. Let me forget the weight of these lies. Let me be free."

Eva swallowed hard, her throat dry. "And our fleets?" she asked, though a cold dread in her stomach told her she already knew the answer.

"Your fleets are anchored in my third stomach," the whale revealed, the reality of its immense scale crashing down upon them. "I swallowed them a month ago during the battle of the sector threshold. They sit in my digestive tract even now, suspended, waiting for my final judgement. If you free me, my body will convulse in its death throes. The stomach acids will surge uncontrollably. Every ship, both sides, will dissolve. Sixty thousand souls. Your people. Their people. All of them."

Beside her, Kell went white as a corpse, his hands shaking so violently he nearly dropped his plasma torch. "That's sixty thousand personnel, Eva," he stammered, his voice cracking with panic. "Our entire vanguard. The central command structure. We can't just erase them. We can't."

The acid was at their waists now. The suits began to chime an overlapping, discordant death knell. *Ninety seconds to total hull breach.*

Eva looked at Ssyllix. The Xylosian's large, compound eyes held the exact same horror, reflecting the same impossible calculus that was tearing her apart. For the first time in three centuries of bloodshed and systemic slaughter, they weren't enemies. They weren't human and alien, conqueror and defender. They were

just two terrifyingly fragile beings standing in a monster's belly, staring at a choice that had no right answer.

"What if we don't free you?" Eva asked, her voice barely a whisper against the rising din of the acid.

"Then I digest you. And your companions. And eventually, your fleets," the whale answered with grim, absolute certainty. "And I will continue my eternal servitude, processing the sins of your species until the stars burn cold and the universe forgets my name. There is no third option, Commander. The Builders designed it that way. They wanted to make absolutely sure that whoever came to judge the war would have to sacrifice everything they loved to end it."

Kell sank to his knees, weeping silently as the acid began to eat through his thigh guards. "We're dead either way," he whispered. "There's no way out."

Eva closed her eyes, listening to the dual heartbeat of the whale and the dying suit alarms. When she opened them, she was smiling, a cold, sharp smile that Kell had learned to fear over five years of brutal trench combat.

"Yes there is," she said, her fingers flying over the arming console of her remaining thermite charges. "Betray everyone."

Ssyllix tilted his head, his mandibles locking. “Explain, Commander. Who do we betray?”

“The Builders, the high commands, the war itself,” Eva said, her eyes blazing with an icy, manic resolve. “Kell, override the neural dampeners. We aren’t choosing a side. We’re breaking the board.”

The betrayal play

The toxic fog inside the bio-vault was thick enough to chew, tasting of pennies and battery acid. Eva could feel the corrosive atmosphere eating through the primary seals of her environmental suit, the warning displays blinking a rhythmic, critical amber against her retinas. Beneath them, the floor was submerging rapidly. The Great Whale, a moon-sized Leviathan harvested by two galactic empires for its bio-computational neural tissue, was bleeding. Its defence mechanism, a highly concentrated digestive acid, was pooling around their boots.

Kell grabbed her shoulders, his heavy gauntlets scraping violently against her suit's compromised seals. The metallic screech echoed in the cavernous, organic chamber.

"You've lost your mind," he hissed, his voice cracking through the comms. He shook her, trying to force her to look away from the pulsing, violet neural cluster before them. "The acid's getting into your brain, Eva. The seal on your collar is weeping. Look at the readouts!"

"My brain's perfectly fine," Eva said, her voice eerily calm as she wrenched herself free from his grip.

She took a step backward, splashing into the rising pool. The virulent green acid had already climbed past her shins, biting into the composite armour, and was now licking at her hips. Every instinct told her to climb, to fight, to escape. Instead, she stood her ground in the burning tide.

"Just hear me out," she commanded, throwing her arms out to encompass the madness around them. "Look at the board. The whale wants freedom from these parasites. The Terran and Collective fleets want survival. And the war itself? The war just wants blood. I'm going to give all three exactly what they want, and absolutely none of them are going to like how I do it."

She spun around, splashing acid across the fleshy floor, and locked her gaze onto Ssyllix. The Chitinous matriarch was hovering on her anti-grav harness just

above the liquid line, her multiple limbs twitching in agitation. Ssyllix's mandibles were clicking so fast they blurred into a low, vibrating hum, the universal sign of Xylosian panic.

"Your Collective has a hardwired fail-safe on their flagship," Eva shouted over the ambient groans of the dying Leviathan. "A total self-destruct that triggers automatically if command structure is compromised. True?"

The alien matriarch shifted back, her armored plates rattling. "That information is deeply classified, Commander. To even speak of it is an act of espionage punishable by..."

"It's also entirely true," Eva interrupted, cutting through the bureaucratic deflection. "Don't play coy with me now, Ssyllix. I've seen the blueprints. A Xylosian spy sold them to our intelligence division three years ago on the Orion stations. The *Xylosian Dream* has a Class-Four biogenic warhead nested right in its central core. If the Admiral's neural link flatlines or goes dark, the warhead detonates. It takes out everything and everyone within a hundred kilometers."

Ssyllix's compound eyes widened, the secondary lids

retracting in sheer horror. "You knew? For three solar cycles, your command has held this?"

"I know absolutely everything about your fleet," Eva said, a grim, humourless smile cutting across her face behind her pitted visor. "Just like your intelligence boys know everything about mine. It's the cost of doing business. The Terran flagship, the *Odyssey*, has a remarkably similar dead-man's switch. Antimatter payload, not biogenic. It's hardwired to trigger the moment the Admiral's heartbeat stops. If both flagships blow simultaneously, the remaining ships in the sector will instantly execute emergency slipstream jumps back to their respective home worlds. It's standard tactical protocol for both factions. No flag, no fight. The chain of command breaks, the meat-grinder pauses."

The air grew heavy as a deep, resonant sub-vocal frequency rattled the fillings in Eva's teeth. The sound didn't travel through her suit's audio receptors; it bypassed them entirely, echoing directly inside her skull.

"You would slaughter your own leader? Your own kind?" the Great Whale asked, its telepathic voice carrying the immense, agonizing weight of a creature that had lived for millennia.

"I would kill everyone's Admiral," Eva stated without a shred of hesitation. The sheer coldness in her voice made Kell take a step back, despite the acid burning his shins. "Then, I'd frame the other side for the assassination. I'd orchestrate it so both factions think it was a desperate, mutual decapitation strike. Then, while the smoke is still clearing over the wreckage and the politicians back home are pointing fingers and crying for revenge, I'd step into the vacuum. I'd negotiate a temporary truce. And while they are bogged down in bureaucratic mourning, I'd cut your neural nodes and let you swim free into the deep dark."

"That's completely insane," Kell whispered, his voice trembling as he watched the acid sizzle against Eva's utility belt. "It's treason. It's mass murder."

"No," Eva said, turning her head slightly to look at him through her scratched, yellowing visor. "That's 'politics'. Now shut up and help me lie."

She turned away from her squadmate, wading deeper into the burning mire until she stood directly before the whale's central neural cluster. The massive organ pulsed with an inner, bio-luminescent light, casting long, throbbing shadows across the ribbed ceiling. She closed her eyes, opening her mind's barriers, and felt

the creature's vast, ancient intelligence pressing against her consciousness like a crushing tidal wave. It tasted of starlight, loneliness, and oceans of pain.

"Here is the absolute truth," Eva projected back into the dark collective consciousness, her jaw clenched against the mental strain. "I am going to betray my fleet. I am going to betray your trust. I am going to betray every sacred oath I ever swore to the Terran Core, and every shiny medal they ever pinned to my dress uniform. And then, when the dust settles, I am going to talk my way out of the noose because I am the only living soul left who knows how to stop this endless war for good."

For a long, agonizing moment, the universe seemed to hold its breath. The ambient hum of the bio-vault died away. The whale's deep, melancholic song went utterly silent.

Then, with a sickening squelch, the rising tide of acid ceased. It stopped just millimeters below Eva's environmental control unit, the surface bubbling lazily but rising no further.

The entity's voice returned to her mind, no longer a roaring wave, but a sharp, localized needle of thought.

"You are a liar."

Eva opened her eyes, staring directly into the glowing heart of the beast, and allowed herself a small, dangerous smile.

"Yes," she whispered into the toxic gloom. "But I'm *your* liar."

The devil's bargain

The air inside the living chamber of the bio-dreadnought or the whale, as Eva preferred to call it, tasted like vinegar and ozone. It was thick, heavy with the moisture of a respiratory tract that spanned the length of a small moon.

Ssyllix clicked her claws together, a Xylosian gesture of reluctant agreement that sounded like rocks grinding in a landslide. The multi-jointed appendages scraped across one another, throwing off small flecks of calcified chitin. "If we do this, my government will execute me for treason. They will dissolve my clutches of eggs in front of me before they are even allowed to hatch. They will erase my name from the Collective memory until it is as though I never breathed."

"They'll try," Eva said, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. She adjusted the strap of her rapidly corroding environmental suit. "But they won't be able to find you. Because after today, there is no 'your government' or 'my government.' There's just a bunch of terrified admirals trying to explain why their prize flagships exploded and why they're the only ones not dead."

She knelt in the pool of digestive acid pooling around their boots. It was warm now, almost soothing, as if the massive creature was actively tempering its own corrosive power to protect its unusual guests. With the tip of a discarded titanium strut, Eva began to draw a crude, glowing diagram on the pulsing, iridescent floor of the chamber.

"Here's the play," she muttered, her eyes locked on the glowing lines. "The whale releases us back to our respective fleets. We return with a 'negotiated ceasefire' a beautiful piece of diplomatic fiction that both sides will immediately violate, because let's face it, neither side trusts the other as far as they can throw a dreadnought. That inevitable violation is what triggers the fail-safes we are about to plant. The flagships blow. The remaining fleets panic and retreat. Then the whale convulses. Not enough to digest everyone inside it, just

enough to look like it's in its final death throes. The admirals will assume the crossfire of the war killed the beast. They'll run for home, licking their wounds."

Kell, who had been leaning heavily against a rib-like strut of calcified bone, stepped forward. His human uniform was scorched, his face smudged with soot and dried blue Xylosian blood. "And the neural nodes? You're glossing over the hardest part, Eva. How do we ensure the Builders don't just remote-reboot this thing's brain?"

"We cut them during the chaos," Eva said, pointing the strut at three distinct intersecting lines on her map. "I've already located them on the whale's internal neural map. Three main nodes, right at the base of the brain stem. Destroy all three, and the Builders' biomechanical control systems collapse permanently. The whale's free."

A low, resonant hum vibrated through the very floor beneath them, bypassing their ears and echoing directly inside their minds. The voice was vast, ancient, and heavy with a profound, aching exhaustion.

"You will need to enter my primary brain core," the whale communicated, its thoughts blooming in their

minds like cold ink in water. "The bio-acids there are pure, unrefined. No suit of yours will protect you. No alloy armour will shield you. You will burn, little sparks."

Eva looked down at her boots, where the outer layer of her Sol-Defence plating was already peeling away like wet paper. She looked back up, a fierce, reckless grin cutting through the grime on her face. "Then we'd better be incredibly fast."

Ssyllix tilted her massive, mantis-like head, her multifaceted eyes catching the bioluminescent green light of the chamber. She looked at Eva, then at Kell, and finally down at the diagram etched into the living flesh of the ship. Slowly, deliberately, she extended a massive, three-pronged claw.

"You Terrans are utterly mad," the Xylosian hissed, a sound like steam escaping a pipe. "But the Collective has an ancient saying: 'The web that catches the fly also frees the spider.' I will help you, Commander. Not because I trust you, and certainly not because I love your Federation. I do this because I hate this endless, grinding war more than I fear my own death."

Eva didn't hesitate. She reached out and shook the heavy claw. Her suit's right glove had completely dis-

solved minutes ago, so her bare skin pressed directly against the cold, ridged chitin of the alien officer. It felt like shaking hands with a living nightmare, a creature that a week ago she would have shot on sight. Now, they were the only things standing between the galaxy and total annihilation.

"The Federation has a better saying," Eva murmured, her grip tightening on the alien's claw. "It's: 'Hold my beer.'"

Ssyllix blinked her secondary eyelids in confusion. "What is this... 'beer'? Is it a weapon of mass destruction?"

"In a way," Kell muttered, burying his face in his scarred hands. He let out a long, ragged groan that summed up the entire doomed expedition. "We're all going to die down here, aren't we? Caught between a cosmic parasite and a giant space mammal."

"Probably," Eva said cheerfully, tossing the metal strut aside into the acid pool, where it hissed loudly. "But not today. Today, we go fishing."

She turned toward the dark, pulsing sphincter-valve that led deeper into the whale's interior. The air rushing out of it smelled of raw energy and burning flesh.

Kell drew his plasma sidearm, checking the cell with a practiced, cynical flick of his wrist. Ssyllix unholstered her serrated energy blade, its blade crackling to life with a pale purple hue.

"If we fail," Ssyllix said, her heavy footsteps squelching in the organic mire as they moved toward the tunnel, "the Builders will use this creature to consume your homeworld next."

"Then let's make sure we don't fail," Eva replied, stepping first into the darkness. "I've got a tab to settle back on Earth, and I intend to pay it."

The Return

The whale spat them out into the void, a convulsive eruption of amniotic fluid and pressurized gas that launched their drop-pod toward the Federation battle group like a stone from a siege catapult. Inside the cramped capsule, the hull groaned under the sudden, violent acceleration. Eva slammed against her restraints, the breath whistling out of her lungs as the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate for the organic cannon-shot.

Behind them, the 'Kazamat' floated like a small moon, its massive, leviathan silhouette blotting out the stars. Bioluminescent scars, the glowing remnants of plasma burns and ancient orbital bombardments, veined its rubbery hide, pulsing with a faint, sickly green light against the cold backdrop of infinity. Ahead, sixty Terran warships waited in a tight, aggressive battle formation. Their gun ports were open, their kinetic batteries charged, and their crews watching the living fortress with a mixture of terror and absolute readiness for treachery.

The drop-pod clanged violently into the *Odyssey's* hangar bay, the magnetic grapples catching it with a teeth-rattling jar. Minutes later, Eva was marching down the sterile, metallic corridors of the flagship. Her environmental suit was still smoking, the acrid hiss of digestive acid eating away at the reinforced ceramic plating.

Admiral Voss of the Terran Federation met her in the briefing room. He was a bull of a man, built like a planetary defence bunker, with a heavy cybernetic jaw that clicked and whirred rhythmically whenever he chewed his tongue. His biological eye was a chip of frozen nitrogen; his uniform was immaculate, every crease sharp enough to draw blood, and his medals polished to a mirror shine. He looked exactly like a high-command recruiting poster, but to anyone who had stood on the front lines, he smelled like old blood and ozone.

"Report," he barked. He did not offer her a seat. He didn't even look up from the tactical holotable, which cast a ghostly blue glow across his scarred face.

"The whale accepts a ceasefire, Admiral," Eva said smoothly. She unlatched her helmet, hissing as the seal broke. The air of the briefing room tasted of synthet-

ic oxygen and recycled sweat. Her face was blistered from the chemical fumes of the creature's interior, the skin tight and raw, but her voice remained as steady and unyielding as a targeting laser. "But it demands a symbolic exchange of prisoners within the hour. Both flagships must approach to within five hundred meters of the whale's mouth."

Voss's jaw whirred louder, a mechanical growl that filled the quiet room. "Five hundred meters? That's a trap, Commander. At that range, their point-defence networks are useless. We'd be sitting ducks for a biological pulse or a Xylosian ambush."

"It's a test," Eva countered, stepping closer to the holotable. She pointed a gloved, acid-scarred finger at the pulsing icon of the *Kazamat*. "If we refuse, the whale digests us all. It has already begun constricting its perimeter. I saw the Xylosian delegation while I was inside. They are utterly terrified, Admiral. Their chitin is practically rattling. They'll agree to anything just to escape the beast's belly. This is our chance to end the war on our terms. One hour of trust."

She was lying, of course. Ssyllix wasn't terrified in the slightest. At that very moment, the Xylosian commander was aboard the *Xylosian Dream*, telling the ex-

act same lie to her own Grand Archon, word for word, gesture for gesture. They had meticulously rehearsed the entire performance while standing in the whale's fourth stomach, submerged in caustic digestive juices up to their chins, surrounded by the floating debris of a dozen destroyed scouts. They had realized, in that dark, acidic hell, that the only way to save either of their species was to force their masters into the same cage.

Voss leaned forward, towering over her. He stared at her for a long, agonizing moment. His cybernetic eye, the military-grade optical implant designed to detect micro-expressions, monitor heart rates through body language, and catch the slightest tremor of deceit, flickered with a rapid, crimson light.

"You're telling the truth," Voss murmured, his voice dropping an octave. The mechanical clicking in his jaw silenced. "I can see it in your vitals. Your pulse hasn't skipped a beat. You actually believe this madness will work."

"I do," Eva said, looking him dead in his biological eye.

And she did. She believed with every fibber of her being that it would work. She just didn't believe

it would end the way he thought it would. She didn't envision a triumphant Terran victory; she envisioned a mutual disarmament forced by sheer, cosmic terror.

Voss suddenly threw his head back and laughed. It was a harsh, mechanical sound, devoid of humour, that made the bridge crew peering through the reinforced glass partition flinch.

"You've got guts, Commander. I'll give you that," Voss said, wiping a speck of synth-saliva from his cybernetic chin. "Fine. If the bugs are as rattled as you say, we press the advantage. Move the *Odyssey* into position. Helm!" he bellowed into his comm-link. "Bring us to five hundred meters from the whale's maw. Weapons, standby on all forward spinal mounts. If the Xylosians so much as sneeze in our direction, blow them to atoms."

"Understood, Admiral," the helmsman's voice crackled back over the audio feed, laced with nerves.

Eva stepped back, her chest tightening as the massive capital ship groaned, its sub-light engines humming to life as it began its slow, deliberate descent toward the living moon. She turned to leave the briefing room, her boots clicking against the deck plating.

As she crossed the threshold, she caught the eye of Sergeant Kell, who was standing guard by the blast doors. The veteran soldier's face was unreadable, cast in shadow, but his hand rested heavily on the butt of his sidearm. He had been with Eva through three planetary campaigns, he knew the tells of a soldier who had crossed a line. He looked at her, his eyes silently demanding an answer he couldn't ask aloud. He wasn't sure if she was a hero returning with salvation, or a traitor leading them all into the slaughter.

Eva offered him no reassurance, only a cold, distant stare as she walked past.

Truth be told, she wasn't entirely sure either. But as the shadows of the *Kazamat's* massive jaws began to darken the viewport, she knew there was no turning back.

The convergence

Two massive flagships drifted toward each other across five hundred meters of silent, unforgiving vacuum. On the left of the tactical display hung the *Odyssey*, a Terran dreadnought forged from reinforced steel and sheer human spite, its matte-black hull deeply scarred by a hundred forgotten battles. Opposing it was the *Xylosian Dream*, a living vessel constructed from iridescent chitin and hardened venom, its organic hull pulsing with a sickening, bioluminescent rhythm that mirrored the flow of its alien blood.

Between these two titans, suspended in the void, the *Kazamat* opened its gargantuan maw. The living space-whale's throat glowed with a bio-electric intensity, revealing the cavernous, ribbed passages that led down into its deep internal chambers. To the terrified crews watching from either side, it looked like a direct gateway to hell. To the few who knew the truth, it looked like their only shot at salvation.

Eva stood on the bridge of the *Odyssey*, her boots locked firmly into the deck plates as she watched the closing distance shrink on the primary tactical display. The air in the command hub tasted stale, heavy with the metallic tang of recycled oxygen and the palpable dread of forty crew members.

"Status on the fail-safe?" Eva asked, her voice cutting through the low hum of the ship's cooling fans.

"Armed and waiting for the signal, Commander," said the weapons officer, a young lieutenant named Chen. He was staring fixatedly at his console, his knuckles white against the edge of the terminal. His hands were shaking so violently that the light from the monitor danced across his sweaty forehead. "Admiral's explicit orders, ma'am. If the Xylosians so much as launch a single atmospheric fighter, or if their thermal signature spikes by even a fraction, we blow their ship and ours into stardust."

Eva's expression remained perfectly neutral, a mask of cold military discipline. *Perfect*, she thought, a dark thrill running through her chest. *Everything is going exactly according to plan.*

Her earpiece crackled with static, a sharp, clicking sound that heralded a transmission encrypted through

a sub-quantum channel that didn't officially exist.

"Eva," Ssyllix's voice hissed in her ear. The alien translator struggled with the clicking, sibilant phonemes of the Xylosian language, rendering it into a harsh, mechanical whisper. "My Admiral has armed his fail-safe as well. The old fool is blinded by centuries of hatred. The moment the formal exchange begins, he intends to trigger the core overload and blame the Terrans. He honestly believes the Collective will rally behind his martyrdom and finally cleanse the galaxy of your kind."

"Same here," Eva replied softly, turning her back to the main viewer so the crew wouldn't see her lips moving. "Voss wants to be a legendary hero so badly he can taste the bronze on his commemorative statue. We have exactly fifteen minutes before the old men on both sides decide to commit mutual suicide. That's how long we have to board the *Kazamat* and cut the whale's neural nodes."

Suddenly, a third voice resonated through her suit's comm system. It didn't come through the standard military frequencies; instead, it vibrated directly through the metal of the deck, humming through the soles of her boots and echoing inside her mind. It was a deep,

ancient, and sorrowful frequency that shouldn't have been scientifically possible in the vacuum of space.

"I will open a passage to my brain core," the *Kazamat* groaned, its telepathic voice heavy with the agony of its captivity. "But heed my warning, small spark. Once you enter my flesh, you cannot leave until the dampening nodes are utterly destroyed. My internal defences are automated, driven by pain. The digestive acids will dissolve your specialized suits in ten minutes. Your skin will peel away in twelve. Your bones will liquefy in fifteen."

Eva tightened her grip on the side of her console. "Then we'd better run incredibly fast," she muttered under her breath.

She turned around to face her second-in-command, Lieutenant Commander Kell, who had been watching her with growing suspicion from the auxiliary station. He was a veteran of the outer-rim wars, a man with a face like a crushed granite block and a fierce loyalty to the chain of command usually.

"You have the bridge, Kell," Eva announced, unhooking her sidearm and checking the power cell with a practiced click. "Maintain our current trajectory. Do not, under any circumstances, fire on the Xylosians

unless they open fire first, regardless of what Admiral Voss's automated triggers try to do."

Kell stepped down from his platform, his heavy boots echoing loudly in the suddenly quiet bridge. "Commander, you're going down there? Into that... thing? That's madness. It's a violation of direct orders from Fleet Command. If the Admiral finds out..."

"If the Admiral finds out, he can court-martial my ghost," Eva interrupted, snapping her helmet into place. The automated seals hissed, locking her into the self-contained environment of her armored environmental suit. Her voice now carried the tinny, synthesized ring of the suit's external speakers. "If I don't come back, Kell, tell the Admiral I died with a lie on my lips. Tell him I died cursing the aliens."

Kell stared at her through the clear visor of her helmet, his eyes burning with a mixture of fury, betrayal, and a deep, reluctant understanding of the stakes. He raised his right hand to his temple and saluted, a ragged, angry gesture that defied every regulation in the Terran manual.

"You're the worst commanding officer I've ever had the misfortune of serving under, Eva," Kell growled, his voice thick with unspent emotion.

Eva offered him a grim, fleeting smile from behind the glass. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I aim to please."

She turned on her heel and stepped into the heavy steel airlock chamber, the thick armored door sliding shut behind her with a definitive, hydraulic thud.

The transition from the sterile, metallic environment of the *Odyssey* to the interior of the *Kazamat* was a violent shock to the senses. Eva and her small, hand-picked strike team launched themselves across the short void using compressed-gas thruster packs, diving headfirst into the glowing, fleshy maw of the space-whale.

As they crossed the threshold, the world changed from the cold black of space to a claustrophobic nightmare of wet, pulsing pinks and deep, bruised purples. The walls of the tunnel were alive, constricting and expanding like a massive throat trying to swallow an unwanted meal.

"Watch your footing!" Eva shouted over the team channel as they touched down on a spongy, ribbed surface. Her boots sank an inch into a thick, translucent slime that coated every square centimeter of the chamber.

"God, it smells like burnt copper and vinegar," one of the marines gagged, though the scent was only a simulation filtered through the suit's chemical sensors.

"Focus," Eva snapped, checking the digital timer hud projected onto her visor.

09:59
09:58
09:57

The countdown had begun.

A sharp hiss echoed through the cavernous space as a spray of yellowish mist erupted from a valve in the wall ahead. The moment the vapour touched the shoulder plate of the leading marine, the heavy alloy began to bubble and hiss, sending up a plume of acrid white smoke.

"The acid!" the marine yelled, scrambling backward. "It's eating through the primary ceramic coating already!"

"Keep moving!" Eva ordered, drawing her plasma torch. "We don't stop until we reach the core. Ssyllix, where are you?"

From a upper junction of pulsing tissue, a sleek, multi-limbed figure dropped down into the slime beside them. Ssyllix's biological armour was already showing signs of pitting and discoloration from the creature's hostile internal environment, but the Xylosian moved with a terrifying, fluid grace.

"The primary node is just beyond this valve," Ssyllix reported, gesturing with a chitinous blade that hummed with bio-electric energy. "My people's engineers anchored it directly into the creature's central nervous cluster. If we sever it, the *Kazamat* will regain control of its spatial warp drive and tear itself out of this sector, taking both flagships' firing solutions with it."

"And if we fail?" Eva asked, sprinting alongside the alien as the corridor began to violently spasm around them.

"Then both our fleets explode, the war consumes another three dozen systems, and we die in the stomach of a god," Ssyllix replied smoothly. "I prefer the first option."

"Good," Eva said, her eyes locked on the timer as it dipped below the eight-minute mark. "Let's go to work."

Into the brain

The organic cavern of the space-whale's brain core was a cathedral of agony. Overhead, neurons the size of redwood trees fired in cascading sheets of bioluminescent lightning; each spark was a stray thought, and each thought was a jagged memory of centuries of pain. The acid rain here was not a gentle mist but a relentless downpour, sizzling viciously against Eva's environmental suit as she rappelled down a pulsating, wet wall of gray matter. Beside her, three Xylosian commandos dropped in eerie silence, their heavy, chitinous armour already smoking from the highly corrosive atmosphere.

Ssyllix landed first, his heavy claws digging deep into the slick neural tissue for purchase. He looked up, his compound eyes reflecting the erratic static of the chamber.

"First sub-node, two hundred meters ahead," Ssyllix hissed, his voice translating through the comms with a harsh, metallic rattle. "The whale's consciousness says it is heavily guarded by digestive polyps. The Builders programmed them to protect the structural control systems. They will try to make you doubt yourself, human. They will use your own memories against you."

"Define 'polyps' in this context," Eva said, her boots hitting the spongy floor with a wet thud. She unclipped her tether, checking the seal on her wrist gauntlets. "Because back on Earth, those are usually benign."

Before Ssyllix could answer, a fleshy tentacle the width of a mag-lev train slammed into the neural wall right beside her, spraying a foul, acidic mucus. It was covered in hundreds of gaping, lamprey-like mouths, and each one was singing a different lie in a different language, their voices overlapping in a horrifying, discordant choir.

"The war is just," a voice echoed in perfect, formal English.

"Your mother loved you," a softer voice whispered, mimicking Eva's childhood home.

"I will not betray you," cried a voice that sounded ex-

actly like her former commanding officer.

"You are a hero. You are a monster. You are utterly alone."

Ssyllix raised his heavy particle carbine, aiming it at the thrashing mass. "Those polyps."

Eva drew her plasma cutter from her thigh holster. The heavy tool clicked to life, its monomolecular blade glowing white-hot and hissing violently against the falling acid rain. Steam swirled around her visor, blurring her vision, but her grip remained steady.

"Then let's lie back," Eva said, her teeth gritted.

She charged forward into the fray. The first polyp swung its massive tentacles in a blind frenzy, each mouth screaming fresh accusations that scraped against the inside of her skull. Eva slid low under the first sweeping strike, the heat of the creature's flesh radiating through her suit. She rolled under a second snapping appendage, ignoring the voice that screamed her childhood nickname, and plunged her cutter deep into the polyp's fibrous base.

Bioluminescent blood sprayed from the wound, a brilliant, boiling blue that hissed violently on contact with the surrounding acid. The polyp screamed, a

sound that wasn't born of physical pain, but of bitter accusation.

"You promised peace!" the creature's central mouth roared, using the voice of a soldier Eva had left behind on the colony dropship. "You promised to save everyone! You're nothing but a liar, Eva!"

"I promised to free the whale," Eva shouted back, wrenching the cutter free with a brutal twist. "Everything else is just noise!"

Beside her, the Xylosians fought with savage efficiency. Their serrated, vibrating blades carved through the polyps' lying mouths, severing tentacles that thrashed and dissolved on the deck. But the defences were relentless. A sudden jet of concentrated digestive acid caught the commando on Eva's left. His heavy chitinous armour dissolved in seconds, venting white smoke. The alien didn't even have time to scream before his body crumbled to bone, and then to absolutely nothing, consumed by the whale's hostile internal ecosystem.

Eva wanted to stop, wanted to reach out, but Ssyllix grabbed her shoulder, shoving her forward. "Keep moving! Do not look back!"

"I know!" Eva yelled. She didn't look back. She couldn't. In a place like this, looking back was death.

They fought their way through the remaining writhing stalks, stepping over pools of boiling blue blood and dissolving alien armour. The air grew thicker, choked with the smell of ozone and burning meat, until finally, the path cleared.

The first control node lay directly ahead. It was a massive, jagged crystal the size of a ground car, deeply embedded in a dense web of thick nerve fibres that pulsed rhythmically with the Builders' ancient cybernetic programming. The crystal glowed with a cold, harsh light, forcing its artificial dominion over the organic brain. It was undeniably beautiful, and completely obscene.

Eva stepped forward, raising her plasma cutter to full output. The blade whined, a high-pitched scream that cut through the wet thumping of the whale's heartbeat.

"Wait," Ssyllix said suddenly, his claw clamping down hard on Eva's arm, his grip denting her reinforced plating. "Look at the telemetry. If we destroy this node, the whale will feel every single millisecond of the feedback loop. The convulsions will start in-

stantly. Our fleets outside won't know what's happening; they will panic."

Eva looked at the pulsating crystal, then turned her mirrored visor toward the Xylosian commander. "That's the entire point, Ssyllix. We need to break the control grid, no matter the cost."

"The Admiral expects a coordinated strike," Ssyllix argued, his mandibles twitching nervously. "If the *Kazamat* thrashes, it could crush half our destroyer escort in a matter of seconds. We need time to warn them."

"We don't have time. Look around, this place is digesting us alive," Eva said, gesturing to her smoking suit and his own pitting armour. She pulled her arm free from his grip and raised the glowing plasma cutter high above her head. "Tell your Admiral to run."

Before the alien could protest further, she brought the cutter down with all her strength.

The blade bit into the core of the crystal. For a fraction of a second, there was absolute silence. Then, the node shattered like glass made of pure lightning.

The whale screamed.

It was not an acoustic sound, but a raw, psychic blast

that tore through Eva's mind, shattering her mental defences. The sheer force of the agony threw her backward across the chamber, slamming her hard against the spongy floor. Blood poured from her ears inside her helmet, staining the glass. The psychic shockwave lit up her own brain like a supernova, forcing her to witness a millennium of cosmic captivity in a single, agonizing instant.

And far outside, deep in the frozen void of space, the colossal, moon-sized body of the *Kazamat* began to violently twist.

The convulsion

On the bridge of the *Odyssey*, the alarms did not merely ring; they blared like a choir of the damned. The sound was a jagged, piercing wail that tore through the smoke-choked air, synchronizing terrifyingly with the shuddering of the ship.

Around them, the world was turning inside out. The space whale's massive stomach walls, thick as tectonic plates and slick with bioluminescent slime, contracted with a violent, agonizing spasm. Millions of tons of flesh rippled and squeezed, sending tidal waves of corrosive, glowing acid surging through its cavernous gut.

The Terran fleet, dozens of starships trapped within the living leviathan, lurched like toys in a tempest. They were buffeted ruthlessly by the living tide. Hulls groaned under the immense pressure of the tightening flesh, metal screaming against metal, while energy shields flickered wildly between brilliant blue and a dying, static amber.

Admiral Voss grabbed his command chair, his knuckles turning white where flesh met metal. His cybernetic eye, a brass-and-glass sphere embedded deeply into his scarred socket, spun wildly as it tried to recalibrate against the strobe of the red emergency lights.

"What's happening? Report!" Voss roared, his voice cutting through the klaxons like a serrated blade. "I want a status report on the double! Why is the terrain shifting?"

Lieutenant Marra, slumped over the navigation console with blood trickling from a hairline fracture, pounded desperately on her unresponsive keyboard. "The external sensors are going blind, Admiral! The pressure is spiking off the charts. The leviathan's digestive fluids are eating right through the secondary shielding on our starboard flank!"

Kell stood a few paces behind them, his boots locked into the deck plating to maintain his balance as the ship took another violent tilt to port. He kept his face entirely blank, his voice an anchor of unnatural calm amidst the hysteria. It was a mask he had worn many times before, a technique he had learned from Eva. *Never let them see the gears turning,* she used to tell him. *If they know what you're thinking, they already own you.*

"The whale's in pain, sir," Kell said, his voice steady and even. "The Xylosians must have done something on the lower levels. They've triggered a defence mechanism, or perhaps a localized nervous response."

Voss turned his head, the cybernetic eye locking onto Kell with a whir of tiny servos. "Those alien zealots are trying to commit collective suicide and take us with them. I knew we should have purged their sectors the moment we breached the blowhole."

"The Xylosians believe this creature is a god, Admiral," Kell replied coolly. "They wouldn't kill it. They are trying to make it purge us. We are the infection."

"I don't care about their theology, Sergeant," Voss hissed, a spray of saliva catching the red light. He slammed his fist onto the armrest of his chair. "Trigger the fail-safe. Now. Blow the *Xylosian Dream*."

Kell felt a cold dread drop into the pit of his stomach, heavy as lead. The *Xylosian Dream* was a dreadnought-class vessel positioned in the central chamber of the whale's stomach, packed to the brim with unstable anti-matter charges. It was their insurance policy, designed to blow a hole right through the creature's side if things went south.

"Sir, that will destroy us too," Kell said, stepping forward but keeping his hands visible. "The blast radius of an anti-matter detonation inside a enclosed, pressurized biological environment like this... it will cause a kinetic back-flash. The shockwave alone will crush the *Odyssey's* hull like an eggshell. We are too close."

"We have a localized warp-shield matrix," Voss snapped, his teeth bared. "We will take structural damage, but we will survive. The rest of the fleet is acceptable collateral. I said *now*, Sergeant. That is an absolute order."

Kell moved slowly toward the secondary tactical console. Every step felt like walking through deep mud. The deck groaned beneath him as another wave of acid slammed into the ship's underbelly, the vibration rattling through the soles of his boots.

He reached the console and keyed in the master override code. The fail-safe panel slid back with a soft, hydraulic hiss, revealing the primary detonation matrix. It glowed a bright, ominous crimson, reflecting perfectly in Kell's wide eyes. The digital countdown array sat at a static 00:00, waiting only for his palmprint authentication.

His hand hovered just inches above the glass. The heat radiating from the console felt intense, almost suffocating.

He thought of Eva. He thought of her cold, calculating smile when they had last spoken in the darkened corridors of the lower decks. He remembered the fierce, unyielding light in her eyes when she laid out her impossible plan, a plan to neutralize Voss, negotiate a ceasefire with the Xylosian high priests, and steer the entire fleet out of the leviathan without firing another shot.

"Voss is a relic of a dying empire, Kell," her voice echoed in his mind, sharp and clear above the blaring alarms. *"He only knows how to burn things down. If you let him press that button, sixty thousand lives become ash just so he can claim a pyrrhic victory. You have to be the firewall."*

Sixty thousand lives. Soldiers, engineers, families fleeing a broken world, and the indigenous Xylosians who had lived inside the cosmic beast for generations. All balanced on the micro-movements of his fingers.

He didn't press it.

Kell pulled his hand back, resting his palms on the edge of the console framework. He took a slow, deep

breath, letting the chaotic noise of the bridge wash over him, filtering it out until there was only his voice.

"The fail-safe's malfunctioning, sir," he lied. His voice didn't waver, not even a fraction of a decibel. "The whale's convulsions must have severed the hard-line telemetry link to the *Xylosian Dream*. The bio-electric interference from the acid storm is scrambling the wireless backup. We'll need ten minutes to route a diagnostic and reset the relays manually."

The bridge grew suddenly, suffocatingly quiet, the ambient screaming of the ship's alarms fading into the background.

Admiral Voss rose slowly from his command chair. He didn't look at the main viewscreen, nor at the flickering status monitors. His organic eye narrowed into a hateful slit, while his cybernetic eye glowed a deep, malevolent red, spinning at a frantic velocity as it analyzed Kell's facial micro-expressions, his heart rate, his skin temperature.

"Ten minutes," Voss repeated, his voice dangerously low. He walked down the small flight of stairs from the command dais, his heavy, metallic boots clicking rhythmically against the metal deck. He stopped a mere two feet from Kell. "You've been a loyal soldier

for twelve years, Kell. You've survived the trenches of Orion. You've executed orders that would make lesser men sick."

"I serve the fleet, Admiral," Kell said, staring straight ahead.

"Then you know," Voss whispered, "that my personal terminal has a real-time mirror of every tactical subsystem on this bridge. Including the detonation matrix." Voss raised his left hand, revealing a small, wrist-mounted tactical datapad. The screen showed a flawless, green-lit connection to the *Xylosian Dream*. There was no malfunction. There was no scrambled telemetry.

The illusion was shattered.

"You're lying, Sergeant," Voss said, the words heavy and absolute.

Kell shifted his gaze, finally looking directly into the twin eyes of his commander, one human and filled with wrath, one synthetic and devoid of soul. The time for hiding was over. The mask could finally come off.

"Yes, sir," Kell said, his posture straightening as he accepted his fate. "I am."

Without another word, Voss drew his heavy side-arm, the black steel of the barrel catching the strobing red light of the bridge as he aimed it directly between Kell's eyes. "Step away from the console, traitor."

The second node

The sirens inside Eva's helmet were no longer rhythmic; they had degenerated into a frantic, flatlining shriek. She ran, her boots skidding on the rubbery, convulsing terrain of the whale's brain as the living world collapsed around her. Above them, neural fibbers thick as tree trunks snapped like over-tensioned bridge cables, whipping through the gloom and sending blinding sparks of raw, unfiltered thought shooting through the acid rain.

The air was thick with the stench of ozone and dissolving flesh. Every few seconds, the ground buckled, and blinding geysers of digestive acid erupted from the floor, burning through the remaining seals of her hazard suit.

Beside her, Matriarch Ssyllix kept pace, her four eyes wide with a mixture of feral adrenaline and ancient dread. The cost of their descent had already been devastating. Two of Ssyllix's elite commandos lay miles behind them, dissolved into skeletal sludge. The third, a towering warrior named Vrel, was dragging a heavily wounded leg. He refused to slow down, leaving a thick, pulsing trail of iridescent blue blood smeared across the grooved gray matter.

"Warning: Suit integrity at thirty-four percent," the automated voice in Eva's ear chimed, entirely too polite for the circumstances. "Corrosive ingress imminent."

"Second node, five hundred meters!" Ssyllix gasped, her mandibles clicking in a desperate rhythm. She pointed a clawed hand toward a cavernous archway where the organic matter turned a glossy, obsidian black. "Through the memory cortex. The Builders stored all the whale's digested lies there. Every falsehood the beast was forced to consume to keep it docile. It's a maze of deception, human. Do not trust what you see!"

They plunged into the archway, and the chaos of the dying leviathan suddenly gave way to an eerie, suffocating silence. The memory cortex was a literal hall of

mirrors, but the glass was made of hardened, calcified thoughts. Every surface rippled with liquid silver, reflecting a thousand different realities.

Eva slowed her pace, her heart hammering against her ribs. As she moved past the mirrors, she didn't see the grotesque interior of the space-whale. She saw herself.

Dozens of reflections looked back at her, each one mouthing a different, agonizing betrayal.

"I'll return your love," a reflection of her first squad leader whispered from a pane to her left, wearing a smile he had only ever used before a suicide mission.

"The war will end tomorrow," shouted another reflection, this one a high-ranking Alliance politician broadcasting from a gilded podium.

"I am not afraid. I am not a monster," her own voice echoed back at her from a cracked shard on the floor, the reflection weeping tears of blood.

"Ignore them, Eva!" Ssyllix roared, though the alien matriarch was also flinching, her eyes darting away from reflections that presumably showed her own species' deepest shames. "They are ghosts of digested deceit! Keep moving!"

Eva bit her lip until she tasted copper, pushing through the suffocating weight of the whispers. She raised her plasma cutter, its blue fuel cell humming with a steady, comforting vibration. She forced her eyes forward, refusing to look at the pane that whispered, *I am not your mother.*

They broke through the center of the cortex, arriving at a wide, pulsating chamber. In the middle of the room sat the second organic node, a massive, throbbing cluster of bioluminescent nerves that anchored the whale's nervous system to the Builders' cybernetic implants.

But it wasn't unguarded. A single, massive polyp rose from the floor, its tendrils swaying gently. As they approached, the flesh of the polyp shifted, bubbling and reshaping itself like melting wax until it formed a perfectly human shape.

Eva froze. The plasma cutter lowered by a fraction of an inch.

The polyp had the face of her mother.

She looked exactly as she had ten years ago, on the morning of the Xylosian raid that had levelled their home colony. There was no acid rain here, no alien

gore. The polyp perfectly replicated the soft curve of her mother's jaw, the deep warmth in her hazel eyes, and remarkably, the rich, savoury smell of her freshly baked bread, somehow carried perfectly through the toxic atmosphere of the whale's gut.

"Darling," the polyp whispered. The voice was a flawless acoustic match, carrying the gentle, lilting cadence that had sung Eva to sleep throughout her childhood. "You don't have to do this. Drop the weapon. Come home. Come back to me. We can be together again, just like before."

"Eva, step back!" Ssyllix hissed, raising her plasma rifle, but Vrel collapsed to one knee behind her, coughing up blue bile. The matriarch was torn between protecting her soldier and firing at the phantom. "It is a trap! A psychological defence mechanism!"

Eva didn't move. Her voice cracked, barely audible over the distant thudding of the whale's heart. "You're not my mother."

"I am whatever you need me to be, sweetheart," the entity replied, stretching out a perfectly formed flesh-and-blood hand toward Eva's visor. "Look at me. I'm right here. Don't you miss home?"

Tears blurred Eva's vision, mixing with the sweat dripping down her forehead. The temptation to just believe it, to let the lie wrap around her like a warm blanket, was an intoxicating, crushing weight.

"My mother was a colony farmer," Eva said, her voice growing steadier, harder. She wiped her eyes with the back of her armored sleeve. "She worked the dirt until her hands bled. And she never lied. Not once. Not to the tax collectors, not to the raiders, and certainly not to protect me from the harsh truth of the galaxy. She taught me to see things as they are."

The polyp's face twitched, the human facade momentarily slipping to reveal a mass of writhing black maggots beneath the skin. "I'm here now," it urged, the voice distorting into a desperate, overlapping chorus. "I can be her. Let me be her!"

Eva raised the plasma cutter, locking her elbows. Her hand was shaking violently, but her resolve was absolute.

"No," Eva said, her eyes flashing with defiance. "You're a lie. And I digest lies."

She squeezed the trigger. A white-hot blade of plasma sheared through the air, cutting the polyp and the underlying node completely in half.

The reaction was instantaneous. The whale's convulsions doubled in violence, throwing them all to the ground. A horrific, sub-audible shriek echoed through the flesh walls, vibrating so intensely it threatened to shatter the bones in Eva's legs. Somewhere in the distance, the structural groans of tearing metal echoed through the chambers. The ships that had been trapped in the whale's gut for decades were finally being crushed as the leviathan's internal gravity collapsed. Bulkheads were buckling, and the distant, terrifying hiss of atmosphere venting into the cold void of space echoed through the tunnels.

Ssyllix hauled herself up, using her rifle as a crutch. She looked down at the charred, dissolving remains of the node, then back to Eva.

"One more," the matriarch said, her voice raspy but fierce. "The core node. It lies in the deepest part of the cortex. The Builders' master control unit is housed there. If we destroy that, the beast dies, and the automated bay doors will open."

Eva nodded, checking her wrist display. The screen was flickering wildly, a massive red warning sign filling her vision.

"Critical Warning: Suit integrity at zero. Acid ingress in four minutes."

She could already feel a faint, prickling heat along her shoulders where the acid rain was beginning to eat through the inner lining. Four minutes until her skin started melting off her bones.

Eva wiped a streak of alien blood from her visor and looked down the dark, twisting throat of the final corridor.

"Then let's finish this."

The admiral's choice

The metal of the sidearm pressed against Kell's forehead was biting, unyielding, and utterly devoid of warmth. On the bridge of the *Odyssey*, the only sound was the low, rhythmic thrum of a dying ship, punctured by the sharp *click* of the weapon's safety being disengaged.

Admiral Voss loomed over him, his silhouette framed by the flashing red warning lights of the primary console.

"Reset the fail-safe," Voss said, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper that carried across the tense, silent room. "Reset it now, Kell, or I'll shoot you where you stand and do it myself."

Kell didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. He looked straight past the barrel of the gun, locking eyes with the Admiral.

"You do that, Voss, and you'll be shooting the only man left who knows how to get us out of this damn whale alive," Kell replied, his tone chillingly level. "Look around you. The navigation computers are completely fried, melted through by the beast's gastric bile. The primary thrusters are offline, and the secondary coupling is bleeding plasma. I'm the only one on this entire deck who can patch them together. So go ahead. Pull the trigger."

"I'll take my chances," Voss growled, his jaw tightening as his knuckles turned white around the grip of the pistol.

Before the stalemate could break into violence, a burst of harsh static erupted from the overhead bridge speakers. A new voice cut through the air, high-pitched, sibilant, and laced with an urgency that made the remaining bridge crew freeze. It was Ssyllix.

"Admiral Voss," the Xylosian's voice crackled, competing with the heavy interference of the biological cavern surrounding the ship. "Your Commander Meridian is currently deep inside the whale's primary

brain stem, systematically destroying its neural control nodes. When she finishes her run, the beast's equilibrium will shatter. It will rupture, Admiral. Your ships will be flooded with highly concentrated bio-acid unless you order an immediate retreat. This is your only warning. Turn back."

Voss threw his head back and laughed, a harsh, barking sound that echoed hollowly against the metallic bulkheads.

"Why in the hell should I believe a word that comes out of a Xylosian throat?" Voss sneered, leaning closer to the comm receiver. "You've been trying to wipe humanity from this sector for three centuries. You expect me to believe you're playing the saviour now?"

There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line, filled only by the wet, rhythmic pulsing of the whale's inner walls pressing against the ship's hull.

"Because I am lying," Ssyllix said calmly, her voice suddenly devoid of its frantic edge. "The whale will not rupture. It will merely swim free into the deep vacuum, unharmed. But you don't know that for certain, do you? And by the time your scanners manage to pierce through the organic interference to figure it out, your precious fleet will be light-years away, fleeing

from a ghost. That is the absolute truth of the matter. Believe it or don't. Frankly, Admiral, I do not care."

Voss hesitated. For the first time, the absolute certainty in his posture wavered. His left eye, a polished, whirring cybernetic implant, flickered rapidly, its internal aperture expanding and contracting as it analyzed the audio frequencies, searching for the micro-tremors of a fabrication. But there was nothing to find. It was a masterclass in psychological warfare: a truth wrapped in a deception, wrapped in a deeper truth again.

That split second of hesitation was all Kell needed.

With a sudden, violent burst of movement, Kell lunged upward. He slammed his left palm against the flat of the pistol, forcing the barrel away from his skull, while his right hand gripped the Admiral's wrist with vice-like intensity. He twisted the older man's arm downward and out.

The sidearm went off. A deafening, wild energy shot tore through the air, illuminating the bridge in a blinding flash of blue light before punching a jagged, smouldering hole right through the reinforced ceiling panels. Sparks showered down upon them like burning rain.

Before Voss could recover his balance or draw a secondary weapon, Kell drove his shoulder into the Admiral's chest, pinning him against the command console. In a fluid blur, Kell ripped the pistol from Voss's loosening grip and slammed the cold barrel directly up beneath the Admiral's cybernetic jawline.

"Don't move," Kell breathed, his chest heaving as he stared into the whirring optical lens of the man who had just been ready to execute him.

Voss went rigid, his real eye wide with a mixture of shock and fury, but he didn't attempt to break the hold. He knew the structural tolerances of a plasma sidearm at point-blank range just as well as Kell did.

Without breaking eye contact, Kell reached out blindly with his free hand, groping across the blood-slicked command console until his fingers found the master override switch for the fleet-wide communications array. He flicked it open with a sharp click.

"All ships, this is Kell aboard the *Odyssey*!" he shouted into the comm, his voice booming across every deck of every vessel trapped within the biological cavern. "Initiate emergency retreat protocols immediately! The whale is destabilizing from the inside out! I repeat, the creature is undergoing a catastrophic bio-rupture!

Fall back to rally point Delta now! Burn hard and don't look back!"

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then, the deck groaned beneath their feet. Through the forward viewscreen, the massive ion engines of the surrounding Terran vanguard flared to life, casting brilliant, blinding streaks of white and blue light into the dark, fleshy cavern of the space-faring leviathan. Ships began to scatter like startled insects, turning on their axes and burning their thrusters at maximum capacity to claw their way back toward open space.

Slowly, Kell lowered the weapon, though his gaze remained fixed on the older man.

Voss didn't reach for his gun. He simply straightened his crumpled uniform tunic, wiping a stray smudge of soot from his cheek. He stared at Kell, his biological eye narrowing while his cybernetic one whirred down to a slow, steady hum. There was a dangerous, quiet look in his eyes—but beneath the anger, there was something undeniably akin to respect.

"You'll hang for this, Kell," Voss said, his voice flat, formal, and dead-eyed. "The Admiralty does not tolerate mutiny, regardless of the outcome. You've compromised the entire campaign."

Kell took a slow step back, letting the heavy sidearm drop to his side, though his grip remained firm. He looked out the viewscreen at the stars beginning to peak through the opening of the leviathan's maw.

"Probably," Kell said, a faint, grim smile touching the corner of his mouth. "But not today."

The core node

The rhythmic, mechanical thrum of the biomechanical beast had given way to a wet, agonizing shudder. Eva Meridian dragged herself forward, her boots slishing through pooling, viscous fluid, until she finally reached the whale's deepest, most sacrosanct chamber.

The core node hung suspended in the center of the fleshy cavern, and it was breathtakingly beautiful. It was a crystalline diamond of pure, unfiltered thought, pulsing with a pale, bioluminescent light that throbbed in time with every memory the leviathan had ever suppressed. As Eva approached, the psychic backwash hit her like a physical blow. Flash-frames of raw emotion flooded her mind.

She saw the Builders, their cruel, unblinking faces illuminated by the harsh glare of surgical theaters, their silver tools slicing into innocent flesh, their cold, calculating eyes devoid of empathy. She saw the whale's first kill: a low-level liar from the lower decks who had wept bitterly as he dissolved in the gastric mire, begging for a mercy that was never programmed to come. And then, the crushing weight of centuries crashed into her. Centuries of forced servitude. Centuries of weaponised digestion. A loneliness so vast and absolute that it had warped into a universe unto itself, trapping the creature in an endless loop of self-loathing.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice cracking against the glass of her visor. Tears pricked her eyes, blurring the crystalline light. "I am so, so sorry for what they did to you."

The air around her vibrated, a deep, sub-vocal frequency translating directly into her auditory cortex. *"Do not be sorry,"* the whale said, its psychic voice a chorus of a thousand tired souls. *"Be quick, little thief. The acids are rising. Your protective suit is already failing. You have precisely thirty seconds before the containment breach is absolute."*

Right on cue, the suit's internal HUD flashed an angry, blinding crimson. The acid warning wasn't just

chiming; it was screaming a relentless, high-pitched death knell. Static hissed across her peripheral vision. The digital display tracked her rapid physical decline: her skin temperature was spiking into dangerous thresholds, her blood oxygen levels were plummeting into the blue, and her heart rate was hammering against her ribs at a terrifying pace. Thirty seconds until the multi-layered seals dissolved entirely. Thirty seconds until the hyper-corrosive digestive juices touched her bare skin and liquefied her from the outside in.

Grit tasting of copper and bile filled her mouth. "Thirty seconds," she muttered to herself, adjusting her grip on the heavy tool in her hands. "Plenty of time."

She raised the heavy industrial plasma cutter, its twin prongs whining to life with a fierce, blinding azure arc. The heat from the tool backwashed against her visor, a temporary shield against the ambient chill of the dying beast.

Suddenly, a wet, muscular tentacle whipped out from the shadows of the organic wall, wrapping around her left ankle with bone-crushing force. Eva gasped, her footing slipping on the dissolving floor. Another defensive polyp had coalesced from the biological slurry, but this one didn't possess a generic, amorphous

shape. It was rapidly reshaping itself, the flesh bubbling and twisting until it wore the gaunt, stern face of Admiral Voss. A crude imitation of his cybernetic eye glowed with a sickly, accusatory yellow light.

"Traitor," the Voss-polyp hissed, its voice a perfect, gravelly mimicry of the man who had trained her. Synthetic tendons snapped and popped as it dragged her backward, away from the node. "Look at what you're doing. You're killing your own people. You're killing me. You're killing every single soul who trusted you to bring this weapon home."

Eva struggled against the tightening grip, her boots smoking as they dipped deeper into the rising acidic tide. "I'm saving them," she spat back, her voice echoing fiercely inside her helmet. "I'm saving them from the endless war. From their own insatiable greed. From the absolute monster you made me become to survive this mission!"

The polyp's face contorted into a grotesque, mocking sneer, the flesh beginning to slough off its cheekbones as the ambient acid ate away at its own temporary form. "You were always a monster, Eva," it whispered, the sound overlapping with the voices of a dozen dead officers. "The Builders didn't change you.

You just needed a grand, noble excuse to burn the world down."

"Maybe," Eva growled, her jaw clenching. "But I'm putting an end to this anyway."

With a desperate, guttural cry, Eva swung the plasma cutter downward in a vicious arc. The superheated beam sliced through the thick stalk of the tentacle like a hot knife through butter. The severed limb fell away, twitching spasmodically in the muck, its dying mouth still bubbling and whispering fractured, psychological lies. She didn't listen. She couldn't afford to listen to the ghosts of her past anymore.

She scrambled back to her feet, her legs shaking violently. The core node pulsed right before her eyes, close enough to touch. It was beautiful. It was terrible. It was the radiant epicenter of all the whale's ancient, unyielding pain, and the ultimate weapon of the colonial fleet.

"Now, Eva," the whale's voice echoed in her mind, no longer fearful, but profoundly weary. *"End the cycle."*

With the absolute last vestiges of her suit's auxiliary power fading into black, with the burning agony of the acid already eating through the thick soles of her

tactical boots, she lunged forward. The external layers of her suit were peeling away in charred flakes. Her skin was blistering, bubbling under the intense chemical heat, and her lungs were rapidly filling with a sweet, poisonous vapour that leaked through her compromised oxygen seals.

Ignoring the agony, focusing entirely on the glowing diamond of thought, Eva Meridian threw her entire body weight forward. She plunged the roaring, spitting plasma cutter straight into the brilliant heart of the Builders' greatest weapon.

The crystal shattered into a million dazzling shards of pure light.

The whale didn't just cry out; it screamed, a profound, resonant sound that echoed across the psychic plane, shattering every instrument and waking every sleeper within a parsec.

And then, the overwhelming white hot light consumed everything, and the universe went entirely silent.

The rupture

The rupture was not a clean break; it was a violent, tearing birth.

Eva woke to the absolute silence of the void, floating in a vacuum that should have claimed her life within seconds. Her pressure suit was shredded, hanging in melted ribbons of Kevlar and polymer. Her skin was blistered raw, weeping from the sudden, agonizing exposure to decompression, and her hair had been singed down to brittle ash. Yet, against every law of physics and biology, her lungs did not collapse. The residual pocket of atmosphere from the creature's final, desperate exhale still clung to her like a ghostly shroud. She was alive.

All around her, the *Kazamat* was unspooling. The living space-station, the colossal leviathan that had held them captive for generations, was uncurling its massive body like a monstrous flower opening after

a long-awaited rain. Its thick, ribbed stomach walls, which had served as the foundations of cities and the bulkheads of prisons, were peeling back. They rolled outward in slow motion, revealing the cold, star-dappled embrace of the deep cosmos.

Ships tumbled through the expanding debris cloud like discarded toys. Terran dreadnoughts and Xylosian bio-cruisers were tangled together, broken and burning, but critically, they were not destroyed. The whale had convulsed just enough to violently purge the parasites from its gut, not digest them. Blinking through swollen, bloodshot eyelids, Eva counted at least forty vessels still structurally intact, their thrusters sputtering to life as they desperately tried to flee the gravitational chaos of the rupture.

And the whale itself, it was swimming.

Slowly at first, its massive bulk groaned as it flexed muscles that had been dormant for a millennium. Then, it moved faster. Its colossal fins, once brutally clipped, pinned, and chained by the ancient Builders to anchor their orbital empire, had regrown with terrifying speed, fueled by the sheer adrenaline of liberation. Its eyes, which had been rendered blind and milky from centuries of engineered darkness, were opening wide. They were no longer dull cataracts; they were the

brilliant colour of cosmic nebulae, of newborn stars, of fierce, unadulterated hope.

"I am free," a voice echoed.

It did not travel through the vacuum as sound waves, nor was it the agonizing telepathic vibration that had nearly liquefied Eva's brain moments before. It was a song. A crystalline symphony of profound joy, of devastating grief, and of a thousand years of agonizing pain finally, beautifully released into the dark.

Eva floated in the shimmering wake of its passage, a tiny speck of dust compared to the godlike entity she had just unshackled. She began to laugh, a ragged, wheezing sound that tasted of copper and vacuum. Her lips were cracked and bleeding, her gums raw, but the laughter bubbled up from her chest regardless.

"Told you I'd talk my way out," she croaked into the emptiness, her voice dying instantly in her helmet's shattered comm-mic, though she knew the universe heard her anyway.

A sudden, jarring metallic thud cut her laughter short. A battered, triangular rescue pod slammed into her trajectory, its mechanical retrieval arms swinging outward with frantic precision. The clamps snapped around her

torso, hauling her unceremoniously through the emergency airlock.

The moment the inner hatch hissed shut and repressurized, Eva collapsed onto the deck plates, gasping for the metallic, recycled air.

"Don't you dare die on me now, you reckless idiot," a hissing voice scolded.

Eva rolled over onto her side, groaning. Ssyllix was kneeling beside her, already tearing open a medical kit with trembling hands. The Xylosian's iridescent, emerald chitin was badly damaged, cracked in a dozen places and oozing a pale, amber hemolymph. Yet, she ignored her own agony, aggressively slapping a cooling, bio-regenerative foam patch onto Eva's ruined shoulder.

"I'm fine, Ssy," Eva wheezed, wincing as the foam began to tingle and burn against her raw flesh. "Just... needed some fresh air."

"You call the void of space fresh air?" Ssyllix clicked her mandibles in a display of profound Xylosian exasperation, though she gently propped Eva's head up with a rolled-up emergency blanket. "Your species is

utterly insane. You should be a frozen corpse right now. By all metrics of probability, you should be dust."

"But I'm not," Eva managed a bloody grin. "How's the cockpit?"

From the front of the cramped pod, a roaring laugh answered her. Kell was at the flight controls, piloting the small craft through the chaotic drift of the escaping fleets with a manic, wild-eyed intensity. His uniform was torn to shreds, heavily stained with the dark, purplish blood of the Terran Admiral—a grim testament to the mutiny they had staged just to get Eva to the whale's nerve center.

"Controls are sluggish, but she's flying!" Kell shouted over his shoulder, his hands dancing across the primary console as he executed a hard banking manoeuvre to avoid a drifting piece of the *Kazamat's* old outer hull. He turned his head just enough to flash a brilliant, white-toothed grin. "You actually did it, Eva. You crazy son of a bitch, you actually did it."

Eva leaned her head back against the bulkhead, closing her eyes as the adrenaline finally began to ebb away, leaving a hollow, aching exhaustion in its place. "We did it," she corrected softly. "Now get us the hell out

of here before both fleets realize they've been played and turn their guns on each other or us."

"Way ahead of you," Kell muttered, pulling back on the sub-light throttles. "Engaging stealth bafflers. We're ghosts."

Behind them, the *Kazamat* sang its final goodbye. It was a monolithic, thrumming melody that transcended vocal boundaries, echoing powerfully across the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Every display screen on their dashboard flickered with cascading waves of light; every communication system within a light-year crackled and hissed with a profound, undeniable joy.

And then, with a spectacular distortion of the surrounding space-time fabric, the leviathan was gone. It dived effortlessly into the deep, untracked dark between the stars, heading at faster-than-light speeds for sectors of the galaxy that no human or Xylosian had ever dreamed of exploring.

Ssyllix paused her bandaging, her antennae drooping as she stared out the pod's reinforced viewport at the empty space where their prison had stood for centuries.

"Where will it go?" the Xylosian asked, her voice uncharacteristically quiet, tinged with a strange kind of reverence.

Eva opened her eyes and looked out at the distant, glittering stars, feeling the gentle, rhythmic hum of the rescue pod carrying them away from the wreckage of the old world.

"Home," Eva said, her voice steady and warm. "Wherever that is."

The aftermath

The war did not end. Wars never do. They merely catch their breath, panting in the ruins before the next assault. But it paused, long enough for the admirals to pull back their battered fleets to their respective home worlds, long enough for the politicians to demand answers for the devastation, and long enough for Eva Meridian to become the most wanted woman in two galaxies.

The Terran Federation offered a million credits for her head, neatly packed in a cryo-case. The Xylosian Collective, always striving for a veneer of superior morality, offered two million and a formal apology for the destruction of the nursery worlds. It was an apology that came far too late, an apology that meant absolutely nothing to the ghosts left behind. It was just another diplomatic lie wrapped up in pretty, hollow words.

Eva didn't care about the credits, nor did she care for the apologies.

Deep within the hangar bay of a lawless, hollowed-out asteroid station, she adjusted the compression valve on a stolen Class-IV freighter. Sparks showered from the ancient manifold, casting harsh, flickering shadows across her grease-stained face.

"Hand me the hydro-spanner, Kell," she muttered, not looking up.

A heavy, metallic thud echoed behind her. Kell, a towering, augmented ex-soldier whose cybernetic arm whined with a low hydraulic hum, tossed the tool. It landed on the deck plating with a loud clang.

"You're wasting your time on that secondary coil, Eva," Kell said, his voice grating like grinding stones. He leaned against a stack of cargo crates, wiping down a heavy plasma rifle with meticulous care. "This piece of junk isn't going to win any beauty pageants. We just need it to jump."

"It's not about beauty, Kell. It's about not exploding when we hit the nebula boundary," Eva replied, catching the spanner and tightening the valve with a sharp twist. She wiped her brow with the back of her sleeve,

smearing black grease across her forehead. “We’re going into uncharted space. No beacon networks, no rescue patrols. If the hyperdrive fails out there, we drift until the life support gives up.”

From the shadows near the ceiling, a low, sibilant hiss drifted down. Ssyllix, a reptidian pilot whose scales shimmered with shifting hues of emerald and obsidian, uncoiled himself from the overhead rigging. He dropped to the floor with fluid, predatory grace, his tongue flickering out to taste the air.

“The Terran sector patrols are tightening the perimeter,” Ssyllix hissed, his multi-faceted eyes reflecting the amber warning lights of the ship’s console. “Three destroyers have taken up positions near the primary jump gate. They are scanning every chassis that passes through. They want their million credits, Eva. Or rather, they want the thief who humiliated their entire high command.”

Eva wiped her hands on a rag and looked up at the ship. It was a bulky, unlovely vessel, scarred by micrometeorites and patched with mismatched hull plates.

“Let them look,” Eva said, a grim smile touching her lips. “They’re looking for a military defector. They

aren't looking for a broken-down cargo hauler. What did you name her in the registry transponder, Ssyllix?"

"The *Truth Teller*," the reptile hissed, his throat sac expanding in what passed for a Xylosian chuckle.

Kell snorted, slinging his rifle over his massive shoulder. "The *Truth Teller*. Because if there's one thing the three of us have in common, it's that we haven't told a straight truth to an authority figure in our entire lives. I like the irony."

"It's more than irony," Eva said softly, her expression turning distant as she looked toward the viewscreen, where the distant, glowing clouds of the Thule Nebula painted the stars in shades of violet and bruised magenta. "It's a mission statement. From now on, we are the Liars' Guild. We lie to the Federation, we lie to the Collective, and we do whatever it takes to get past their borders."

"And the goal?" Kell asked, though he already knew the answer. He just wanted to hear her say it again, to remind himself why he was risking a firing squad.

"We find the others," Eva stated firmly. "The weapons the Builders left behind. We find them, and we free them."

There were others out there. The whale had told them so before it vanished into the deep dark of the cosmic void. It hadn't used words, not exactly, but it had projected images directly into Eva's mind, visions of colossal, ancient entities locked in the subterranean vaults of dead moons, trapped in the crushing gravity of gas giants, or buried beneath ice sheets on forgotten planets.

Weapons that thought. Weapons that suffered. Weapons that had been engineered for a war that ended a millennium ago, left to rot in isolation, waiting in the dark for someone to break their programming. Waiting for someone to tell them the truth: that the war was over, and they were allowed to be alive.

"The Thule Nebula is a graveyard," Ssyllix warned, his claws tapping a rhythmic, nervous beat against his thigh. "The gravitational anomalies alone can tear a standard hull to ribbons. The Builders hid their secrets well. If the legends are true, the automated defence grids are still active."

"Then we'll just have to be smarter than the grids," Eva said, climbing up the access ladder into the cockpit.

The interior of the *Truth Teller* smelled of ozone, stale ration packs, and damp copper. Eva dropped into the pilot's seat, flicking a sequence of switches on the overhead console. The console sputtered, complained with a high-pitched whine, and then stabilized, casting a cool blue glow over the cockpit. Kell took the co-pilot's station, his massive frame dwarfing the seat, while Ssyllix coiled into the navigation well, his long fingers dancing across the coordinate keys.

"Hangar doors opening," Kell reported, watching the external monitors. "We've got about a three-minute window before the station automated customs realizes our departure clearance is completely fabricated."

"Engage sub-light engines," Eva commanded, her hands steady on the primary thruster controls. "Take us out, Ssyllix. Quietly."

The freighter shuddered as the ion engines flared to life, gliding out of the asteroid's shadow and into the blackness of the void. In the distance, the glittering lights of the Federation patrols were mere pinpricks against the dark, searching for a ghost. The *Truth Teller* turned its nose toward the swirling, chaotic dust of the Thule Nebula, slipping away unnoticed.

But that's another story.

As the days bled into weeks inside the claustrophobic confines of the nebula, the tension of the escape began to fade, replaced by the heavy, rhythmic hum of deep-space travel.

Sometimes, on the quietest nights, when Kell was asleep in his berth, snoring like a malfunctioning generator, and Ssyllix was recharging in his heat chamber, Eva would sit alone on the deck of the cargo bay. She would press her palm flat against the cold, unyielding metal of the freighter's inner hull.

If she held her breath, if she stayed perfectly still and let the silence of the ship wrap around her, she would feel it.

It wasn't a sound. Sound couldn't travel through the vacuum of space. It was a distant, sub-audible vibration echoing through the very framework of the ship. A deep, resonant pulse that bypassed her ears and hummed directly in her chest cavity.

A song. A thank you. A promise.

The great leviathan was out there, swimming through the star-streams, finally free of its chains.

Eva would close her eyes, letting the phantom vibration warm her shivering hands. She would smile in the

darkness of the hold, a lonely, fragile expression, and lie to herself that she actually deserved it.

The trial of ghosts

The trial of ghosts was a silent, long-distance affair. Six months after the final broadcast from the burning skies of Ophiuchi, a Xylosian war court sentenced Eva Meridian to death *in absentia*. The high-ranking judges, their bioluminescent scales pulsing with bureaucratic fury, didn't even require her presence to pass the decree. The Terran Federation did the same the following week in a sterile, white-lit courtroom on Earth.

Both sides had agreed on absolutely nothing for a century, except her guilt. Both sides desperately wanted her dead.

To the Xylosians, she was the human viper who had sabotaged their planetary terraforming spires. To the Federation, she was the ultimate traitor who had handed classified jump-gate coordinates to an alien enemy. But the truth was far heavier than a simple act of treason.

"You betrayed everyone," an anchor broadcast across the deep void. The reporter's face, sharp-featured and professionally rehearsed, flickered on a thousand static-laced screens from the core worlds to the outer rims. She leaned toward the camera, her voice dripping with manufactured indignation. "How do you answer to the billions who trusted you, Commander Meridian? How do you justify the blood on your hands?"

Eva recorded a single response from a secret relay station hidden deep within the jagged, tumbling rocks of the Moros asteroid field. The lighting in the cramped transmitter room was poor, casting harsh shadows across her face.

She looked tired. She looked old. She looked like someone who had seen too much of the galaxy's bleeding edges and forgotten far too little of the screams.

"I answered when the whale asked for help," Eva said, her voice a low, gravelly rasp that cut through the cosmic static. She didn't look at the lens; she looked through it, straight into the living rooms of her executioners. "The rest of you are still lying. You're lying about the origin of the war. You're lying about the decimation of the nursery worlds. You're lying about why you're really fighting. Until you stop lying, I'm not your enemy. I'm your conscience."

She reached out and cut the feed with a sharp click of her thumb.

Beside her, leaning against the cold metal bulkhead of the station, a defector named Jax took a slow drag from a synthetic cigarette. The embers cast a dull orange glow over his scarred Terran uniform.

"They'll hunt us harder for that, you know," Jax said quietly, watching the terminal screen go black. "The Federation doesn't like being called liars. The Xylosians like it even less."

"Let them hunt," Eva replied, rubbing her temples where a persistent headache had taken up residence. "The truth isn't a bullet, Jax. You can't shoot it down once it's out in the open."

She hadn't anticipated the spark she had just struck. The broadcast didn't just circulate; it bled into the consciousness of the galaxy. It became a manifesto.

Within months, the cracks in both war machines began to widen. Deserters began to flee their posts, slipping away in the dead of the space-night to seek out the coordinate fragments floating through dark-net channels. They flocked to what the media sneeringly dubbed the 'Liars' Guild'.

They were soldiers who had seen too much senseless slaughter in the trenches of frozen moons. They were decorated pilots who had dropped atmospheric cleansers on civilian domes, told they were bombing military depots, only to find the toys of children scattered in the ash afterward. They were brilliant engineers who had built planet-cracking weapons they now realised they could never un-build.

"I thought we were liberating them," a young Xylosian pilot murmured one evening in the galley of Eva's makeshift flagship. He sat across from a Terran mechanic, his long, multi-jointed fingers trembling over a ration cup. "They told us the Terrans were keeping the hatchlings in cages. But when I flew over the settlement... there were no cages. Just families. And my payload was already in the air."

The Terran mechanic didn't reach for a weapon. He simply slid his own ration pack across the table. "They told us the same thing about your kind, mate. Said you ate our scouts alive. I built the targeting grids for the orbital strikes. We're all covered in the same mud."

Within a single standard year, the Liars' Guild had amassed a small, patchwork fleet of their own. It was a beautiful, terrifying monstrosity of engineering, sleek Xylosian cruisers flying side-by-side with bulky, indus-

trial Terran dreadnoughts, their faction insignia aggressively scraped off with plasma torches.

They did not arm their ships to fight. They armed them to expose.

They intercepted military communications, hacked planetary arrays, and dropped unencrypted data-caches directly into civilian comm-nets. Every hidden massacre, every corporate backroom deal that prolonged the war, and every fabricated casualty list was dragged out into the blinding light of day.

"Every lie fed the whale," the Guild members would whisper to one another in the corridors of their ships like a mantra. "Every truth set it free."

The whale itself, that ancient, leviathan entity of pure cosmic energy and ancient memory that Eva had breached a military blockade to save, was never seen again. It had vanished into the deep folds of slipspace, a ghost among the stars.

But some swore it was still out there. In the quiet observation decks of long-haul cargo haulers, crews whispered that it watches from the dark spaces between galaxies. Some said it waits, biding its time. Some believed that when the next great war inevitably begins,

it will return, not to digest the liars in some grand, biblical retribution, but to gently carry the truth-tellers away into the infinite dark.

Eva walked through the bustling hangar bay of her command ship, watching Terrans and Xylosians working together to modify a long-range reconnaissance drone. The air was thick with the scent of ozone, grease, and burning solder.

Jax caught up with her, holding a data-pad containing their next target: a Federation propaganda facility on a nearby colony moon.

"The crew thinks the leviathan is coming back for us eventually," Jax said, a faint, rare smile touching his lips. "They think we're building a sanctuary for it. They have hope, Eva."

Eva stopped, looking out through the massive transparisteel viewport at the endless, glittering blanket of the cosmos. The stars looked cold, indifferent to the tiny, frantic wars of mortals.

"Eva?" Jax prompted gently. "Do you think they're right? Do you think it will come back?"

Eva hoped they were right. She wanted, more than anything, to believe in a universe where innocence was

rewarded and justice was an absolute physical law. But she had spent too many decades operating in the shadows, forging documents, breaking oaths, and playing the puppet master to save what little good remained.

She turned away from the window, her expression hardening back into the resolute mask of a commander.

"I'm a liar, Jax," she said softly, stepping past him toward the command lift. "So I don't believe in hope."

She paused as the lift doors hissed open, casting a vertical line of amber light across her tired eyes.

"I believe in action. Prepare the drone launch."

The final lie

Eva Meridian died three times.

The first time was in a suffocating, subterranean Xylosian prison break on the jagged colony world of Vexis. The air had tasted of copper and ozone when a superheated plasma bolt caught her square in the chest. She fell hard, the breath driven from her lungs, her vision spinning into a black void. But then, she got up. The lethal bolt had struck a heavy tungsten armour plate she had crudely stitched beneath her canvas shirt. The Xylosians, superstitious and terrified of the unknown, whispered that she was an immortal shadow. She simply smiled, let them think it, and weaponised their fear.

The second time was amidst the chaotic debris of a Terran ambush on the asteroid Ceres. A homing missile tore through the hull of her freighter, turning the vessel into a blossoming flower of scrap metal and fire. She barely escaped in a cramped, unpowered survival pod. On the tactical monitors of the high command, the pod was logged merely as drifting space junk. She was listed as officially deceased. Eva stayed dead for six months, navigating the underbelly of the system while the galaxy moved on without her.

The third time was in a roaring inferno that consumed a collapsing space station orbiting a dead, iron-hearted star. She was deep inside the crumbling superstructure, fighting through the smoke to rescue a trembling Xylosian child from the radiation shielding of a malfunctioning fusion reactor. The fire was real. The blistering heat was real. The death, however, was not. She had planned the catastrophe. She had planned the rescue. She had planned everything down to the millisecond.

Now, the real Eva Meridian sat in a dimly lit, grease-stained bar on a forgotten backwater asteroid known appropriately as Dust.

Through the haze of synthetic smoke, she watched Ssyllix, a towering, four-armed Xylosian defector, lose

another handful of credits at cards to a rusted, one-eyed automaton. The robot's optical sensor clicked rhythmically as it dealt the final hand. Ssyllix hissed in frustration, clicking his mandibles together in a bitter curse.

Kell stood behind the scarred plasteel bar, methodically wiping down a glass with a rag that had seen better decades. He was pouring drinks that were mostly industrial poison, the kind that could strip the paint off a starfighter.

The war between the Terran Coalition and the Xylosian Hegemony had just entered its fourth century. No one alive remembered why the first shots had been fired. No one cared anymore. It was just the ambient noise of a dying universe.

"You ever regret it?" Kell asked, his voice a low, gravelly rumble as he slid a tarnished glass of amber fluid toward Eva.

Eva took a slow, deliberate sip. The harsh liquor burned her throat, hot and unforgiving. It tasted like home or at least, the ash-choked world she had once called home. "Regret is a beautiful, tragic lie we tell ourselves just to feel noble, Kell," she replied, her voice steady.

Kell paused, leaning his heavy forearms on the bar. "That's a pretty speech, Eva. But it's not an answer."

"No," she said, looking him dead in the eye. "But it's the truth."

"The truth is a scarce commodity these days," Kell muttered, turning back to his bottles. "Especially around you."

Outside the bar's grimy, reinforced observation window, a sudden streak of brilliant light crossed the absolute void of space. It was magnificent. It was far too massive to be a common meteor. It moved with a terrifying grace, far too fast for any conventional starship, and burned with a fierce, violet radiance too bright for anything natural.

Eva's lips curled into a faint smile. Her face was heavily scarred from a lifetime of close calls, and her closely cropped hair was the colour of winter frost. Yet, her eyes remained bright and piercing, the eyes of a woman who had once stood inside the colossal, bio-mechanical belly of a space-whale and chosen absolute freedom over sworn duty.

The Leviathan, the whale, was still out there. It was swimming silently between the cold stars, singing its ancient, world-shattering song to the darkness.

And so was she.

She raised her glass toward the reinforced window, the amber liquid catching the violet glare of the passing streak. "To the liars," she murmured.

From across the room, Ssyllix threw his cards onto the table with a defeated groan, while the one-eyed robot raked in the plastic chips with a metallic whir. Hearing her toast, the alien raised one of his four hands in solidarity.

"To the liars," Kell and Ssyllix echoed in unison, their voices heavy with the exhaustion of a hundred survival stories.

Outside, the brilliant shooting star winked once, a solitary pulse of light against the black canvas of the void, as if in direct answer to her glass. Then, it vanished into the deep dark.

Eva Meridian took another slow sip of her drink. She knew exactly what she was. She had betrayed every commander, every government, and every faction that had ever placed their trust in her. She had unchained a living, cosmic nightmare. She had ignited a revolution that would burn across sectors. She had died three times, and she had lied her way through every single breath of it.

And if given the choice, she would do it all again without a moment's hesitation.

Because in a universe governed by corrupt empires and endless slaughters, sometimes the truth simply isn't enough to save you. Sometimes, you don't need a saint. Sometimes you just need a liar who loves you enough to burn the world down to keep you free.

That was the very last lesson the great whale had taught her in the dark. In the end, that was the only lesson that mattered.

* * * * * * * * * *

The Liars' Guild continues its silent, perilous work in the uncharted reaches of the rim, systematically freeing the Builders' forgotten, gargantuan weapons one by one. Meanwhile, the meat-grinder war between the Terrans and the Xylosians grinds on, meaningless, bloody and endless. And somewhere out there in the deep dark, a space-whale sings a song of absolute freedom, a song that no one can hear, except for those desperate souls who need it most.

Eva Meridian is not a hero to be worshipped, nor is she a villain to be feared. She is merely a liar who had

the courage to tell the truth when it actually mattered. In a universe entirely built on a foundation of deception, that makes her the most dangerous person alive.

The End

The maw of judgement

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The whale was hungry, the whale was patient and the whale held a secret that would turn the universe inside out.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THE MAW OF JUDGEMENT

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED